The chaotic magical order of Austin Osman Spare and some relevant deliberations on the

techno-phantasmagorical subject

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Austin Osman Spare & drawing from *A Book of Satyrs* (1943-45)

Abstract:

Particularly in respect to the technologically-assisted artist – and the attendant pressures of our speeding omnipresent computer communication network on art production – there has been a sustained effort to question the role of the artist/subject as the intending and knowing autonomous creator of art (as its sole logocentric coherent creator). This premise will be explored through the trance drawings and theories of the English artist/magician Austin Osman Spare (1888-1956).

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"An automatic scribble of twisting and interlacing lines permits the germ of an idea in the unconscious mind to express, or at least suggest itself to consciousness. From this mass of procreative shapes, full of fallacy, a feeble embryo of an idea may be selected and trained by the artist to full growth and power. By these means, may the profoundest depths of memory be drawn upon and the springs of spiritual instinct tapped." Such said Austin Osman Spare in a short essay he wrote called "Notes on Automatic Drawing" in1916 for the British art magazine *FORM*.

But who is Austin Osman Spare, you might ask? He is an artist replete with potentials, but who has no place in the cannon of Modern Art. He is a spiritual artist – one who concentrated on transforming his libidinal energy into art through the use of automatism prior to the Surrealists – in whom we cannot be satisfied – but with whom we can be impressed. Why impressed? Because among the many complexities that have transpired in today's society due to the delirious effects of information-communication technology – and the proliferation of visual information that has resulted from this technology – is the changing nature of artistic definition. And Spare's use of automatic instinct in creating his art addresses this condition fully. As you may know, automatism, in the arts, is an act of creation which either allows chance to play a major role or which draws on the unconscious mind through free association, states of trance, or dreams. Spare was a pioneer in this practice, specifically with his experiments in trance, which is basically self-initiated work with reflexive feedback loops: the basis of cybernetics.

He is impressive too in philosophical terms, as contemporary postmodern thought has been concerned with the poststructuralist deliberation on the

notion of the subject in order to question its traditionally privileged epistemological status. Particularly in respect to the automatic-assisted techno-artist (an artist whose discourse revolves around networks and rhizomes) there has been a sustained effort to question the role of the artist/subject as the intending and knowing autonomous creator of art – as its coherent originator. Again Spare's automatism informs us here. In fact, for me, the semi-automatic drawings of A. O. Spare have become emblematic of this question of the rigorous scrutiny of the subject which Jacques Derrida has described of as *logocentrism*: the once held distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity; between public and private; between fantasy and reality; and between the unconscious and the conscious realm.

Today we understand that these distinctions are breaking down under the pressure of our speeding and omnipresent computer communications network technologies. We are now part of an automated technologically hallucinogenic culture that functions along the lines of a dream, free from some of the strictures of time and space; free from some of our traditional earthly limits which have been broken down by the instantaneous nature of electronic communications, particularly with its crown jewel, immersive virtual reality. The modernist existential concept of the singular individual has been supplanted by the electronic-aided individual, in a way liberating her from linear time, and vaporously placing her in a technologically stored eternity (simulacrum-hyperreality). This quality of phantasmagorical and perverse displacement has for some signified a tightening spiral which formulates a new vision of existence, a vision which Jean Baudrillard has called 'pornographic' and which Deleuze and Guattari have called 'schizoid'. Both these descriptions apply aptly to the drawings of A.O. Spare in a variety of ways

which I will make apparent shortly. For those, and they are numerous, who are not familiar with the work of Spare, let me first provide some rudimentary background on him while I show some of the work.
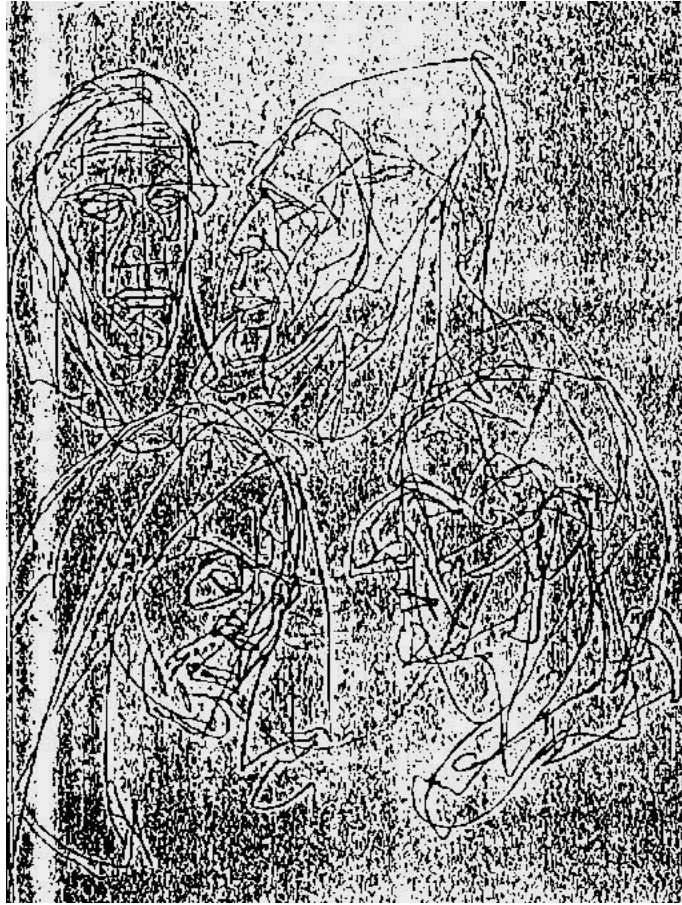

Austin Osman Spare, *Automatic Drawing* (1924)

Austin Osman Spare was born the son of a London policeman in 1888. He died in 1956. Doom loomed abundant in *fin de siècle* England as Spare came to age; thus his development into what can now be recognized as a late-decadent, perversely ornamental, graphic dandy in the manner of Felicien Rops and/or Aubrey Beardsley can be readily contextualized.

As a young man Spare was for a brief period of time a member of the Silver Star; Alister Crowley's magical order. Spare's lifelong interest in the theory and practice of sorcery was initiated, he recounted, by his sexual relationship at a very young age with an elderly woman named Paterson. To perform sorcery, for Spare, was a practice meant to captivate, to encircle, and to ensnare spirits. It is not quite the same thing as practicing magic, which is the art of casting spells or glamours. For Spare, as well as for Crowley,

Tantricesque sex – with its withholding of the orgasmic – held the means of access to their magical systems. However, it is in Spare's conception of radical and total pan-sexual freedom, consisting in the unrestricted expression of what he held to be the *inherent dream*, where we first detect the seditious and chaotic philosophy which drove a prong between himself and Crowley – and every other esoteric system but his own brand of chaos magic/art.

In 1905, at the tender age of 17, Spare self-published his first collection of drawings in a book of aphorisms entitled *EARTH INFERNO*. In it, he lamented the death of what he called *the ubiquitous women of unconsciousness*, (he believed that out of the flesh of our mothers come dreams and memories of the Gods) and castigated what he called the *inferno of the normal*. For Spare, and I agree with him here, there are no levels or layers to consciousness, and no dichotomy between the conscious and the unconscious. There isn't even a clearly definable boundary between consciousness and the object of consciousness, between subject and object, between action and situation. There is only a depth or *thickness of consciousness* which varies in proportion to our state of self-awareness – from the thinnest film of near being, where we engage in pure desire/instinct driven towards action, to a so paralyzing thick opacity of catatonia. *The point of automatism is that the more spontaneously we act, the less self-conscious we are*.

Austin Osman Spare, drawing from *A Book of Satyrs* (1943-45)

Spare's *EARTH INFERNO* disparages the world of humdrum banality in favor of an exotic pan-sexual orb which Spare began to reveal in a spate of awesome non-automatic drawings somewhat reminiscent of the decadent artists previously mentioned. His intention was pan-sexual, transcendental, and androgynous, in that Spare claimed that he was "… all sex" and that what he was not was "… moral thought; simulating and separating." Moreover, he wrote that, "When belief detaches itself from the accessories of convention, desire stands revealed as the ecstasy of the self, ungoverned by its simulated forms."

In 1907, Spare self-published a second collection of drawings in a publication named *THE BOOK OF SATYRS* which contained acute insights into the social order of his day. Then in 1910, Spare began work on a third book, this time of embracing principles of chaos magic with its use of *semi-automatic drawings*, entitled *THE BOOK OF PLEASURES: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ECSTASY* (1913).

In 1914 Spare held his first one-person exhibition at the Baillie Gallery in London that included many of the semi-automatic sketches he drew while half asleep or in a self-induced masturbatory trance. Indeed, most of Spare's semi-automatic work – from 1910 onward – were produced in onanistic self-induced trances which he claimed were sometimes controlled by intrusive occult intelligences working through him. Here, through masturbatory trance, he said, the "I become atmospheric." Such phantasmagorical theories are expanded on in his 1921 book *THE FOCUS OF LIFE: THE MUTTERINGS OF AOS.*

Such theories of art as chaos magic reminds me of the disembodied state so often encountered in electronic environments. As Christine Boyer writes in *Cybercities*, "in virtual space, the so-called 'self' is uncoupled from the body, projected into computerized space, and reconstructed in digital form ... both the body and the 'self' are represented within virtual space in a disembodied manner..." Indeed, Spare considered his best accomplishments those which he said were produced through him by disembodied spirits rather than by him: often by the hand of the phantom spirits of Blake, da Vinci, Holbein, and Durer. Not bad virtual company.

Spare quite wildly would declare that his was the automatic hand utilized by these deceased masters. Through his automatic and delirious technique Spare claimed to be able to draw upon "the profoundest depths of memory" and to "tap into the springs of instinct." These drawings can be found in a book Spare prepared – but never self-published – in 1925 which he called *A BOOK OF AUTOMATIC DRAWINGS* (posthumously published in 1972). Even more automatic and semi-automatic drawings were lost when on May 10th, 1941, during the height of the London bombings, Spare's London flat was obliterated by a bomb.

Austin Osman Spare, drawing from *A Book of Satyrs* (1943-45)

It is in his highly extravagant practice of automatic openness and swank self-denial/self-pleasure that Spare's relevance to the poststructuralist/post-internet conceptions of the decentered and distributed subject are found. Specifically, Spare's relevance here is to be found in his interests in the loss of subjectivity – as experienced in magical-sexual transport fantasies – that now dovetail into the philosophical loss of sovereignty typical of the disembodiment encountered when convincingly immersed in virtual space. Here – for example with the loss of body consciousness specific to total-immersion within a virtual reality environment – one frequently senses a transporting dissolution moving consciousness away from self-consciousness. Also there is an obvious bearing on aspects of on-line faux self-permutation *avatars.*

By participating whole-heartedly in his insertion (and semi-fake disappearance) into the transpersonal symbolic economy of the sign through the assumed equivalence of life and death – in what perhaps can be imagined for us as digitized-stored post-existence – Spare remains truly an individual, if not altogether alone in his time. His art was a radical-transcendental false egoless gesture – he certainly was a bogus collaborator – fabricated in order to make semi-automatic art do magical things. In the process, he created an exciting conception of chaos art which focuses on collective and collected selves. Undoubtedly, his is a view which counters the long-standing Western Metaphysical phallocratic (heroic) portrayal of male artist selfhood. And yet, doesn't his view of compiled selves – akin to the famous death of the subject – offer just the sort of resistance to the structures of logocentric civilization that simulation theory claim is impossible? For me, that is its main benefit: its emphasis on anti-simulation within simulation.

In "Notes on Automatic Drawing" Spare wrote that "Let it not be thought that a person not an artist may by these means become one. But those artists who are hampered in expression, who feel limited by the hard conventions of the day and wish for freedom, these may find in automatic drawing a power and a liberty elsewhere undiscoverable."

Spare's early conception of the illusory coherence of the *I*, renders everyone and every sex equally phantasmagorical (as disembodied) akin to the way speeding electronic-computer networks do. His pan sexual conception of automatic every-sex was clarified when he also wrote, "In the ecstatic condition the mind elevates all sexual powers towards infinity." And, "Speed is the criterion of the genuine automatic. Art becomes, by this velocity an ecstatic power expressing in a metaphorical language the desire for joy."

But in effect, his pan-sexual joyful *I* existed primarily as the construct of a system of male forces which he claimed acted through him on the creation of a synergistic complex image. This synergistic compounding of the mnemonic threshold encapsulates our current post-postmodern-networked predicament in that the fabulated digital-self today may feel sublimated by the automatic system in which it operates. It may feel eclipsed (but also freed) by the mammoth world wide web (www) – as phantom information bits flow continuously around and through us in a vague but endless whirl of unverifiablity. This www digital-self unquestionably partakes in a data proliferation which forms, bit by bit (byte by byte), into an extensive aggregate somewhere deep in the abstruse recesses of hard drives. A data proliferation, for me, awaiting discharge and reformation through contemporary art. This conceptual art of digital discharge interests me greatly, in that my recent aim

has been to focus attention on the artistic interface between the virtual and the actual: what I call the *viractual* realm.

With the increased augmentation of the self via electronics feasible today, actual human flesh may co-exist indistinctly with the virtual from exterior points of view and the organic seemingly fuse with the computer-robotic. Perhaps by automatically stirring the viractual-self, Spare can be understood as a precursor of digital fluidity/copy-ability, working as he did, visa-a-vise onanistic actions while forestalling the actualization of his orgasm – thus maintaining an extended virtual state of self-pleasure. Certainly his remarkable sex/magical method for making post-conceptual viractual art suggests a methodology based on obsession and longed for ecstasy – which I have taken as my working method too: a method which plays in the area of control/non-control – with an aim towards constructing a capricious alliance that associates discourses of machined virtuality with organic sexuality. An association which opens up both notions to mental connections that enlarge them.

The digital-self in art can be impregnated by sustained desires that become energized by the magical supposition that deep memory responds to chaotic longings. In relationship to this method Spare wrote, "The artist must be trained to work freely and without control within a continuous line and without afterthought – that is, the artist's intentions should just escape consciousness. In time, shapes will be found to evolve, suggesting conceptions, forms – and ultimately style."

To be sure, each era has its own redundancies and its own compliances; yet Spare felt it his privilege, even his obligation, to sally forth and be inordinate in

his openness to past representational techniques and structures; but not in any placating or merely plausible way, as often the meager contemporary appropriatonists and samplers do. For Spare, only chaotic excess is magnificent. Only chaotic opulence, which borders on the decadent, can offer a true examination of the illusory self. Particularly our illusory digital-self, which today arises out of the present climate of technological flow and informational abundance.

Such a digital-self is the technologically expanded psyche which exhibits an anti-essentiality of the body. It is the body-in-bits which allows no privileged logos, but insists, rather, on a displacement (or deferral) of gender-based meanings. Here the sexual body is undone by chaotic disturbances it cannot contain. Here only ideas of multiple-selves can adequately represent the artist as social communicator. Here only transformative and diaphanous notions of the self as multitude, can accurately reflect the massive transformational effects of webbed high-technology.

So, it is relevant then to consider Spare's means of becoming courageously individual – through his frenzied tranced-groupings. In effect, he achieved his individuality through the transgression of his artistic masters. In terms of the original's unimportance to our electronic era's conception of art as simulation, Spare's claim to meta-individuality in his production (really what he claimed was a co-production achieved through automatic means) seems prophetic. If an ephemeral collective history of digitized art images, and the unseen labor of computer programmers who helped make them, lurks and reverberates internally in each technologically aided consideration of art today beyond personal propensity – than inner freedom from external artistic authority

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seems futile. We artists act with what art history authority has passed down to us. But what if the search for digitally-assisted art in a contemporary context of the information society is more simply directed towards not repeating what has been collected and stored? This possibility – achieved through the automatic-unconscious art act – is what I have chiefly learned from Spare's automatic and semi-automatic drawings, and from his wild writings on chaos magic – as well as his exclusion from the cannon of modern art history.

With the utilization of noisy semi-automatic processes, viractual post-conceptual art can problematized and crack-open and transfigure the digital-visual world through the strange mixture Spare showed us of disinterested rapture, where off-beat panoramas and chaotic multiple personalities may emerge.

To achieve this Spare would first exhaust himself before beginning to draw in a somber candle-lit room – and in a slight trance – with no particular idea in mind – thereby, he believed, reaching deeper and more remote layers of chaotic memory. He did this while continuously abhorring the accepted values and maudlin conceits of his day.

It is my experience that artificial life computer programming, which utilizes semi-automatic functions, can achieve like ends. I have learned this through developing a real-time operative artificial-life application based on the viral model. This disruptive noise model, though based upon nature, makes use of automatic functions of computation to circumvent conscious control. Such an unpredictable automation stands in stark contrast to the automation of the

Fordism-Taylorism modes of production, with its legacy of instrumental rationality.

The fact that Spare is an obscure sensualist-occultist should not misdirect our appreciation of his artistic and theoretical endeavors. The logic of immersive telepresence, facilitated by webbed-computing, is satiated with parallel obscure concealments. There is much mystery (for most) attached to the invisible digital codes, and routing formats, that expedite our net identity. Moreover, his drowsy, semi-automatic drawings – with their multifarious and allusive search for something antithetical to the established norm – and with their morbid subversion of the concept of individuality and authorship – play well upon contemporary desires for excessive unlimitations, which goggle and the computer network writ large tends to encourage. Spare's noisy drawings, with their inexorably, chimerical style, enmesh, hinder, alter and disrupt the mundanity of visual communication. Like all modes of decadent artistic practices (i.e. Hellenistic, High Gothic, Mannerist, Rococo, *fin de siècle*, and some Postmodernism) they oppose a dogmatically imposed paradigm with a hyper-logic.

Today it is in the hyper-logic of the endlessly duplicable digital image (and/or sound) where post-conceptual art can probe, much as Spare did, for a particular and personal occult expression.

Also, we should remember that within the current electronic environment of hypermedia, artistic annihilations of linear time are now possible. Thus barriers between the deceased and living somewhat abolished. This too recalls Spare's chaotic methodology. In his own fashion he created a non-linear

sphere where deep-memory threatens the common order of events, thus questioning both pat ideas of originality and supplied social codes. Clearly, his non-linear artfulness subverts the modernistic conception of production – with its emphasis on origin, author and finality – but without merely accepting the artificial, the copy, the simulation, as the end point.

So functions now our technomediacratic society: a hyper-society which deploys the effects of rhizomatic connections and trance-like repetitions. It is the artist's task today, I feel, to disadvantage the digital reproductive technology, so as to defeat its attempt at negating our art's spiritual significance. But to do this, we must abandon the Enlightenment baggage of authorizing categories and live non-linearly – while accepting nothing as flatly given. Here again, Spare inspires, as he explicitly eschewed categorization and instead sought to problematize the authority of the category through his own kind of hyper-logic. Thus Spare helps compel us to take notice of the various ways contemporary artistic conventions have molded our responses, and regulated our artistic denotations.

The possibilities of non-linear, complex-entangled, erotic configurations springing forth from the digital Id – made up of mercurial symbols and pan-sexual concepts in opposition to recycled gender and identify representations – provides an interesting insight into the way Spare's art (with its convoluted compositions made up of vague confiscations) directs us towards the conception of the transformative possibilities of technologically-aided art. Perhaps the hope that Spare's non-linear, semi-automatic art can show us a way to resist art history's drive towards reification is a fragile hope indeed in our electronically-homogenized cyber age. Honestly, such a hope may be less

than we deserve, but it also may be more than we usually allow ourselves to envision. What I am certain of, is the need for spontaneous, pre-rational actions in the realm of art and technology so as to pursue spiritual and erotic desire. And here Spare inspires, as he indicated ways in which we may escape the prison of technological logic to encounter intimate realities bound only by the next thought and driven only by the last. This is the answer to the question of how shall I be free today? – and to best express free thought through art and technology without too many tainted preconceptions.

To not dismiss Austin Osman Spare and his art chaos concept of the phantom multitudinous self, which I am reconceiving as net hyper-thought, as dilettante folly, is to become aware of the fact that underlying everything virtual is a web of coded hyper-connections upon which we can exert more manipulative desire than we are normally led to believe by the society of the spectacle. But to do so we must actively use art, and not be content with merely consuming it. For as Félix Guattari said in his crucial book *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, "The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of un-framing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation, or extreme impoverishment, which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself." This reinvention of the multitudinous self is occurring in the best contemporary art through a curious alliance between the cold impersonality of technology and the flames of free idiosyncratic ecstasy.

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Books by Austin Osman Spare
EARTH INFERO

1905

A BOOK OF SATYRS

1907

THE BOOK OF PLEASURES (SELF LOVE):

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ECSTASY

1913

THE FOCUS OF LIFE: THE MUTTERINGS OF AOS

1921

HYPOCRITES

1927

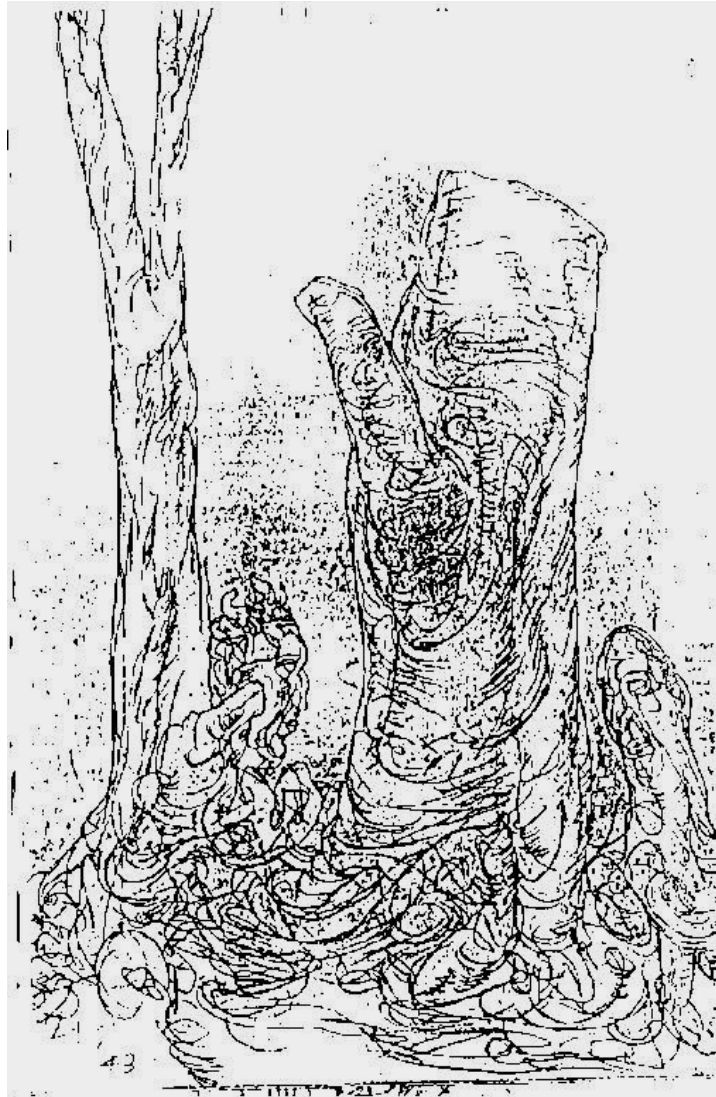A BOOK OF AUTOMATIC DRAWINGS

1925

(Posthumously published by the Catalpa Press, London

1972

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Austin Osman Spare, drawing from *A Book of Satyrs* (1943-45)